

T.H. Watkins. *The Hungry Years: A Narrative History of the Great Depression In America*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1999. Pp. xvi, 587. Paper, \$16.00; ISBN 0-8050-6506-7.

The literature on the Great Depression is among the richest in American historiography, and rightly so. The 1930s was a decade that reshaped America and the lives of individual Americans in dramatic ways. Much of this literature focuses on the ideological origins of New Deal policy and the policymakers themselves, while other books examine the ways these policies affected citizens in a variety of contexts. In this book, T.H. Watkins offers a narrative overview of both these themes, giving readers a real sense of how ordinary Americans experienced the Great Depression.

In the first of the book's three sections, Watkins offers a thoughtful summary of the origins of the Great Depression up to the election of 1932. He captures the drama of human suffering during the depression's early years, as the nation spiraled from being a people of plenty to a country in crisis. Watkins takes readers on troubling, often heart-wrenching tours of "Hoovervilles," penny auctions, picket lines, and sharecropper shacks, while at the same time skillfully placing the relief efforts of state and federal officials in proper context.

The second section deals with Franklin D. Roosevelt's early New Deal programs. Focusing on urban and industrial programs, Watkins argues that these initial programs set the tone for the entire New Deal in that they were rife with ideological conflicts, represented a broad spectrum of approaches, and established the government as the most powerful regulator of the national economy. Watkins emphasizes Roosevelt's utilitarian approach to social and economic problems, arguing that the president was quite willing to try almost anything to stem the nation's suffering regardless of ideological origins or long-term implications.

The last section examines efforts at rural relief. Agricultural programs, though well intentioned, often benefitted landowners at the expense of those who actually worked the land, creating a new class of rural poor made up of displaced sharecroppers and migrant workers. This misunderstanding of rural problems also affected the Tennessee Valley Authority, one of the New Deal's signature programs that blended immediate relief with social and economic regional planning. Like urban and industrial programs, Watkins finds that rural relief efforts as they evolved throughout the 1930s were moderately successful in stemming the tide of human suffering, but failed to bring about complete economic recovery or institutional reform.

Watkins has produced a thoughtful synthesis of the Great Depression, focusing on how it affected the lives of ordinary people. Scholars seeking a fresh interpretation or original research will be disappointed. Teachers or general readers searching for a compassionate, provocative narrative treatment of life during this period will find this book most worthwhile.